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Key Parts of Barbie Report Disputed

U.S. Knew of War Crimes in '45, Ex-Intelligence Officer Says

By DAN MORAIN, *Times Staff Writer*

Disputing key elements of a Justice Department report about Gestapo officer Klaus Barbie's postwar role as a spy for the Allies, a former military intelligence officer said Wednesday that U.S. officials knew of Barbie's war crimes in 1945—four years before the department said Barbie's past became known.

Speaking at the Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies in Los Angeles, Michel Thomas, who fought with the French resistance during World War II and later was a French lieutenant assigned to the U.S. Army Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC), said he wrote a memo identifying Barbie as a Gestapo officer in mid-1945 while working at CIC headquarters in Munich.

"The report on Barbie was a short one," Thomas said, "but stated that he was wanted by the French for war crimes, crimes against civilians and deportations."

If true, Thomas' statement contradicts at least three elements of the Justice Department's report of Aug. 16 which detailed the U.S. government's postwar use of Barbie:

- That the Counter Intelligence Corps, a forerunner of the CIA, was unaware of Barbie's past as the Gestapo chief of the Lyon, France, region, when the CIC enlisted him as an informant in late 1947.

- That Army intelligence officials did not discover Barbie's past as a Gestapo officer until 1949, at least two years after he went to work for the government as a paid spy.

- That U.S. officials in Europe were unaware that Barbie was wanted by the French until 1950.

Thomas noted that mere membership in the Gestapo or the German SS was grounds for arrest in postwar Europe, and that Barbie was an officer in both units.

Barbie, who was extradited earlier this year to France from Bolivia, his home for 33 years, only now is awaiting trial in Lyon for crimes against humanity in connection with his role as head of the Gestapo in the Lyon region, and the deportation and massacre of French Jews and opponents of the Nazi regime.

A Justice Department official, who asked not to be named, said, "If this guy (Thomas) wrote a report, it no longer exists."

"There is an awful lot of evidence to suggest that we didn't know (of Barbie's past) until 1949."

Thomas said that in addition to his CIC duty of arresting former Nazis and ensuring that they were prosecuted, one of his roles was to prepare files on Gestapo officials, a project that lasted from May to August of 1945. He compiled files on 120 to 150 Gestapo officials, one of whom was Barbie, he said.

He said his report was a page to a page-and-a-half long and outlined Barbie's background in the Nazi organizations.

Thomas, who now operates language schools in Los Angeles and New York, knew of Barbie in part because as a resistance fighter during World War II, he was captured by the Nazis and interrogated by Barbie, he said. He added that he was one of the few who escaped from the Gestapo chieftain.

U.S. Declines Comment

"It (the report) was done specifically for the CIC," said Thomas, a stout man in his 60s who left the CIC and Europe in 1947 when he immigrated to the U.S. " . . . It was left with the CIC in Munich. It was in their files

"Whether it was disseminated outside of the CIC, God knows. Whether it was disseminated outside Munich, I don't know."

Allan A. Ryan Jr., outgoing director of the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations and author of the report that documented Barbie's role as a spy for the U.S. government, declined to comment on Thomas' statements.

The report detailed Barbie's role as an informant for four years after the war. It told how, after the French asked U.S. officials to produce Barbie, Army intelligence officers lied to their superiors by saying they did not know Barbie's whereabouts. They then helped him slip out of Europe to Bolivia, where he lived for 33 years until he was extradited earlier this year to France.

The U.S. government issued an apology to France for aiding in Barbie's escape, but also said in the report that Barbie was a useful source of information about leftists in Europe during the postwar years.

At the time the report was made public, Ryan said the Army had no "reliable indication until at least May, 1949—some two years after Barbie was first employed—that he was suspected of war crimes or crimes against humanity."

Thomas was not interviewed by the investigators who prepared the 200-page report on Barbie, he said. Nor did Thomas attempt to contact Justice Department officials who were preparing the report, he said.

Subject of Article

Witnesses who dealt with Barbie in the postwar years and who discussed those dealings with the Justice Department during the investigation did not mention Thomas as a possible source of additional information about Barbie, a Justice Department source said.

However, as the Justice Department's investigation into Barbie opened in March, Thomas was the subject of a long feature article in

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The Times, headlined, "Resistance Hero Remembers Barbie," in which he recalled his encounter with the former Gestapo chief in 1943. He mentioned his work as a CIC officer after the war, but did not say he had written a memo about Barbie.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Wiesenthal Center said Thomas came to his attention about the same time. The center was searching for possible witnesses in this country who would testify against Barbie at his trial, now set to open next year.

Cooper, noting that Thomas will be one of those witnesses, said it did not occur to him to ask Thomas about his role as a CIC officer until after the Justice Department released its report. Earlier this week, the center flew Thomas from his home in Larchmont, N.Y., to Los Angeles, where he told them of his recollections of nearly 40 years ago.

Meanwhile, Rabbi Marvin Hier, a founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, called for a congressional investigation of this government's use of other Nazis.

Hier attacked other contentions in the report, particularly one stating that those who recruited Barbie should not be vilified for their decision. Hier called the decision to employ the one-time Gestapo officer "morally unacceptable."

He also termed "morally disgraceful" the report's statement that Barbie was not in league with some high officials in the Third Reich, such as Adolph Eichmann, who was in charge of Hitler's effort to exterminate the Jews.